

Merrie Monarch Festival

Story and photos by JO2 Jim Williams

Editor

"Hula is the language of the heart, and therefore the heartbeat of the Hawaiian people." This is how King David Kalakaua described this Hawaiian ancient art over a hundred years ago, and today it's still honored and admired every year at the Merrie Monarch Festival on the Big Island.

This year, the 39th Merrie Monarch Festival Hula Competition at Edith Kanaka'ole Stadium in Hilo attracted thousands who came to experience the different styles of hula sometimes often referred to as "poetry in motion."

Since the festival's origins in 1964, the celebration is dedicated to King David Kalakaua, who is often referred to as the "Merrie Monarch," and given credit for bringing back many Hawaiian traditions like the art of hula.

"Hula has always been the dance of the Hawaiian people," said Keali'i'olu'olu Gora, chant instructor for Honolulu's Halau Ke Kia'i A O Hula halau (hula group). "It represents something that is very sacred to us as a people, especially the 'Kahiko' or 'old style.'"

The Kuhiko style of hula, which was banned for many years by the missionaries, came from a time when the Hawaiians had no written language and passed on stories to newer generations with dancing and chanting.

Now halau from around the globe gather together for this annual weeklong event that is often referred to as the "Super Bowl" or "Olympics" of hula.

"We use Merrie Monarch as a tool to express our art, our dance, our stories, our history, our hula," said Gora.

Merrie Monarch hosts many other activities including the different halau's pre-festival activities. The traditional ceremonies include crater-side chanting and mountaintop fern gathering.

There are also hula demonstrations throughout town, Hawaiian arts and crafts, and tours of a Navy ship. A large parade through town led by the Merrie Monarch Royal Court includes Navy representatives and countless bands and performers from around the globe.

But the highlight of the event is the evening hula competition for groups and individuals.

The competition consists mainly of the "kahiko", or traditional hula where participants chant while dressed in traditional Hawaiian outfits and the "auana", or modern hula, with its beautiful costumes and modern music.

"We've added the modern style through the years to represent our creativity and our interpretation of the dance," said Gora.

The performers are judged on a point system based on a group's entry, exit, costuming, grooming, expression, hand gestures, feet or body movements, posture, precision and chant interpretation.

This year, Hula Halau 'O Kamuela from Waimanalo, Oahu was the biggest winner in the wahine (women's) category - winning both

categories as well as the overall combined halau award. Halau Ka Ua Kani Lehua won the kane (men's) kahiko and overall kane awards; Ka Pa Hula O Kamehameha captured the kane auana title.

The festival is not only one of the state's biggest annual cultural events, but is a way to pass on all that being Hawaiian embodies.

"Traditional hula tells a story about our life and times... the past, present and future," concluded Gora. "As Hawaiians, we should be very proud of it - not just to know it, but also to practice it and live our hula and chant every day."



Above: A member of Halau Hula 'O Mehanaokaka entertains crowds at the 39th Merrie Monarch parade in Hilo.
Right: A dancer from California's Halau Hula 'O Lilinoe performs at this year's festival
Below: A line of dancers from Moana's Hula Halau in Moloka'i.



Above: A local halau welcomes crewmembers of USS Salvor with hula lessons.

